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VENETIAN SKETCHES—II

THE SECRET CHARM

BY GERTRUDE SLAUGHTER

A black storm-cloud hung over Venice. As we crossed from the Giudecca, the city wore a deathly pallor, as if in fear of the wind that would soon descend. Giovanni bent to the heavy pole with all his supple strength, and the gondola sped on as never before. Yet the way was long. Every boat was seeking shelter, and the broad canal was almost cleared while we were still far from the foundations which were our only refuge. The cloud was in front of us, and our effort to escape seemed only to be taking us nearer to the danger, as if we were advancing recklessly to meet the attack of some stealthy and inhuman monster. Breathlessly we glided on; breathlessly the surrounding air and water waited. There was not a ripple, not a murmur; in the hush of the white light, the sky hung lower and blacker. Then the blow fell. Just as we rounded the corner 'under the bridge and slipped into a narrow canal, hugging the wall, a torrent of wind and rain swept down upon the water, lashing it into a fury of foam. A dense curtain of rain, blown into long folds and torn into shreds, met the contending waves. The opposite shore was swept out of sight; the large sea-going vessels that must have been tugging fiercely at their moorings were lost to view. The gondola-ferry-boat that had started abreast of us, with two old men for gondoliers, was driven far out across the bay. No boat of the lagoons could resist that onrush of wind and water.

Yet Venice was unshaken. Under the shelter of her foundations she no longer seemed a trembling, terror-stricken creature, but a mighty, protecting force, immovable as a mountain. Inside her canals the storm might have been a gentle summer rain, so helpless was it against the resistance of her ancient walls. The city was drenched; her streets and squares and bridges were

washed clean. But the wind had only ruffled the waters gently, so that they lapped the stones a little more restlessly and splashed a few inches higher than usual. There was just enough movement to suggest a disturbance without and accentuate the calm within.

Such are the transmutations of Venice. Even when the sky is even-tempered, surprises at every turn contradict the tradition of her placidity, and create, despite the verdicts of time and custom, her infinite variety. One crosses over blue and silver water, as pure as if bubbling from a spring, and enters a pool of stagnant slime. One makes one's way through dark and narrow alleys, between walls that shut out the sky, and comes out upon a view of snow-capped mountains beyond a shimmering sea and a pale blue island floating between earth and heaven.

One looks across the Grand Canal at the white Church of the Salute rising against the morning sky with superb dignity. And then one looks down into the water under the church, and there she has become a twisting, writhing dragon. Her dome is the dragon's striped and spotted body; her spire is his tail, rough and thorny and lashing fretfully to and fro; her columns are his ribs; the coils and statues of her architrave are claws and tentacles that dangle in the water. The sun reflected from two round windows under her dome makes a shiny spot on the creature's back; the bronze Virgin on the cupola is a flash of green on his tail. The long ribs of his body are gray and opaque; his skin glistens like silk.

At the traghetto near by an old man sits waiting in his gondola. He is lengthened out in the reflections among the dull blue piles twisted into spirals. An officer approaches and the gondolier bestirs himself. He rises—incredibly tall and slender—and the officer, smoking a cigarette and reading the morning paper, glides, for two sous, across the silk and thorns of the dragon's back. A great barge looms up, as long as the steps of the Salute, rowed by two men at the bow and steered by another at the bulky rudder. A launch comes upon the scene, thumping insistently, noisy and crude for all the white cushions inside its glass-cased cabin. And now other boats are in motion. Air and water alike feel the change; breezes are stirring; and the dragon, with

the other mysterious creatures under the floating city, disappears for the day.

. . .

On a moonlight night in the late summer we crossed from the Giudecca in our gondola, in spite of military rules, and wound our way, at Giovanni's will, through the narrow canals. There was not a sound to break the silence, and here and there low lights, closely shaded, only added to the enchantment. It was high water, and the smells were fresh and clean and salty, and now and again, as we passed under a wall, a heavy perfume of garden flowers floated out through an iron gate. We had forgotten there was a war; when suddenly, from the still sky, the siren blew and the cannon boomed and we knew there was an air-raid.

"As far as I am concerned," said Giovanni, "we go right on. I know not fear. However, I am your servant, and for precaution's sake, we will seek shelter from the shrapnel that will soon be bursting around us." We continued our silent way.

"Don Carlos once said to me," he spoke in his usual quiet voice, "'Giovanni, it looks like a bad storm. Shall we brave it?'" "As you will, Eccellenza," I replied. "Very well, Giovanni. We are both soldiers, you and I. Let us start."

We drew under the Rialto Bridge and waited; and while the cannon and machine guns roared and rattled and thundered, reverberating under the broad arch, I thought of Shylock, and of Antonio and his argosies and his "ancient Roman honor"; and I wondered that one single pound of flesh should have been worth Portia's wit and Shakespeare's genius. And it seemed to me that the Rialto and its bridge would never again recall the exultant "A Daniel come to judgment" and the faltering "I am content"; but that forever and ever it would resound with those deafening guns, drowning every human voice.

When the defense-guns ceased firing, we came out from the black shadows into a luminous silence so deep and breathless that the heart stopped beating. Giovanni's long stroke sent us swiftly forward. Only once was the stillness broken by voices coming from some shelter or *rifugio*. Before the safety siren had sounded we had crossed to the Giudecca and alighted at our doorstep.

In war and peace, in the present as in the past, the changes of Venice are the law of its life. From storm to calm, from noise to silence, from time-enduring stones to vanishing and elusive shadows, from solitude with the sea gulls to the crowd in the café—nowhere else are there such contrasts of light and darkness, of mirth and sadness, of ease and hardship, as in this city of sea-changes. It has often been remarked that these contrasts are reflected in the temper of the people, and they have been taken for a sign of a shifting and irresponsible character. Idlers who live by the toil of others exist in every city; and in Venice, in days of peace, they are so much in evidence that it is not strange that travellers have mistaken them for the real *popolo Veneziano*. But the conditions of Venice, whose very persistence through the ages has demanded a superior intensity of purpose, intelligence of foresight, and patience of industry, have developed a people of extraordinary adaptability, a people capable of concentrated labor and complete relaxation, a people of alertness, of independence, and of ready wit, whose emotions are as intense as they are deep. There is no unreality in the life of Venice.

Change is the law of nature. And the deeper secret of the charm of Venice is not the pathos of beauty in decay nor the strangeness of unaccustomed things that seem unsubstantial like a dream; it is the close intercourse between man and nature, here in this spot which has been reclaimed from the sea-waves and held against them by sheer force of human will. It has been a contest of sharp resistance on both sides. But the struggle with nature is the only warfare that produces harmony. This is the paradox of man's life on earth—his contest with the elements is the guaranty of his peace. Here in Venice the nearness to nature is not that of the rustic who lives by what the earth produces from the seed he plants and waters by his toil. It is something quite different and teaches a subtler lesson. For here where the beauty of art has reached its greatest perfection, where the adornments of life have lent the highest grace to existence, where the finest instincts of civilized man may still be gratified, here at every step men are brought face to face with nature's moods. Her demands are always at his door. Her smiles and frowns become

his own. He is close to the sound of moving waters. A thousand colors of earth and sky are mirrored beneath his window as in a mountain lake. And only by eternal vigilance shall he save the foundations under him from being worn away by the persistent and unrelenting tides.

After many months on the Grand Canal in a house without a garden, when the airs of spring came down the rivers from the flowering land of Italy, the desire to let the eye wander over countless hills and valleys clothed in their spring colors became irresistible. And, choosing for the satisfaction of that desire one of the loveliest spots of the wide earth, we exchanged our house in Venice for a rambling villa that clings to an olive-green hillside above the Anio and looks across the valley at the silvery cascades and the gray town of Tivoli and up into the mountains and out across the Campagna waving its green and purple toward the towers of Rome.

It was the season when the olives are covered with a fine, almost invisible blossom that casts a sheen of silver over their gray leaves, and when the soft green covering of the hills flaunts its youth and splendor against their gnarled, time-worn trunks. Purple iris, mingled with cacti, hang over the yellow walls. Clumps of genista spring out of the slopes by the water-falls, and long, delicious vines hang down in sprays, wet and glistening—the green hair of Mother Earth. In the evening the sun turns the tree-trunks to gold, the larks and nightingales sing from far and near, and the moon rises behind the white cherry-tree on the garden terrace. Gillies and wall flowers and garlic-bloom nestle along the paths, acanthus leaves sprout from the columns of the old house, artichokes and lettuce and *finocchi* and tomatoes and strawberries carpet the slopes under the olives and fig-trees and acacias. Great clumps of aloes festoon the garden wall. On the higher hills, groves of oak trees mingle their young pink leaves with the tender green of elms and birches. Masses of cloud cling to the heights of Monte Gennaro, while all the land below is bathed in gold and a mist of bronze and turquoise and amethyst rolls up at the base of the Alban Hills.

It was Taine who said, "Give me a grand forest on a river bank, or give me Venice"; the sublimity of nature or consummate

art. After a month in the Sabine Hills I returned to Venice to realize that here, if anywhere, one has both. As Taine himself said, "Here for the first time one admires not with the brain only but with the heart, with the senses, with the entire being." And not only art and nature are there, but one's fellow-beings. The peasants in the hills are splendid to look upon and as picturesque as the donkeys that patter along beside them, half-hidden under their loads of trailing branches. ("Don't you want her? Take her, if you like," says a fond father, holding his little girl tightly in his arms.) But for permanent association, day in and day out, the peasants of the hills are not wholly congenial, it must be confessed, to civilized man or woman. If one hungers for peasants in Venice, behold, there is a boat of cabbages just in from the fields; one may meet it in the morning at the Fondamenta and converse with father and son, and it may be with mother and daughter as well. There, too, is the fisherman's family, who live on their boat, who sing the baby to sleep on deck under the half-furled yellow sail, and after their evening meal are thirsting for companionship. One may choose these, or others. For in Venice, "close interthreading Nature with our kind," one passes from the solitude of the lagoon, where only the sea-birds bear one company, to a dinner-table where the latest literature is discussed and world politics are in the air, or to the rarest of libraries—a paradise for the lover of good talk in an atmosphere of books and pictures and old brocades. From the resplendent garden on the Giudecca where avenues of tall white lilies lead through a profusion of flowers and fruits in which the bees and blackbirds have their haunts; or that more formal garden of the Contarini Palace where roses and wistaria climb over sculptured arches of the fifteenth century and curved seats of age-old yellow marble rest in the heavy shade of drooping branches among beds of pansies and foxglove, where the tinkle of a fountain mingles with the rustle of the waters at the foot of the garden wall: from retreats like these, one passes at once into the crowd, into the market-place where the people gather, to the free soup-kitchen where women and old men and children are silent and patient, or Goldonian and vociferous, as suits their mood, or to the work-shop where girls in white gowns and aprons are refashioning twelfth century designs in lace and

linen; from the populous Piazza, illuminated now since the Armistice and glowing like a great festal chamber, through the broad canal where a million lights dance on the water, and into the silent places where the façades of palaces—Byzantine, Saracenic, Lombard, Gothic, and Renaissance—rise above silky shadows into a velvet sky; or into a concert hall to hear the latest music, and the oldest; to the theatre, or the movies, or into a lighted bookshop, or a café; and, after it all, one wanders back to one's house on a silent corner where all night long, under the window, the waves lap the foundation walls, and the night winds freshen the air for another day. Here is the country in the city—*rus in urbe*. Here, on the edge of commodious chambers, are “the arches of the dayspring and the fountains of the deep.” Here is no death, but concentrated life.

GERTRUDE SLAUGHTER.